

Book Review

Uday Shankar, A Photo-Biography: (Ed.) Sunil Kothari and Mohan Khokar; Published by Ravi Shankar on behalf of RIMPA and the Uday Shankar Festival Committee; price not stated.

Rather belatedly, but not inadequately, a long-due homage has been paid in this volume to a genius who was the most outstanding choreographer and dancer of modern India and one of the greatest dancers of the world in this volume. The reminiscences of Rajendra Shankar summarise briefly but also vividly the career of Uday Shankar (1900-1977) and the photographs make the publication a volume to cherish.

Not many people may have fully realised how versatile Uday Shankar was. Like Sergei Eisenstein and Satyajit Ray, he drew innumerable sketches to judge the visual design and impact while working on his choreographic creations. He had studied painting at the J.J. School of Art, Bombay, and it was for further study in this field that he went in 1920 to England where he joined the Royal College of Art, London. He had also learned to play the violin. But a chance meeting with Anna Pavlova proved big with fate. He left painting, made a definite choice of dancing as vocation,

mission and the way to self-fulfilment.

His career was meteoric. He created two ballets for Pavlova — *Radha and Krishna* and *A Hindu Wedding*—and partnered her in their production. After leaving her, and forming his own troupe, he had a sensational tour of Europe during 1931-32, presenting 369 performances in two years, 120 in Germany alone, and covering twenty countries. During his American tour, he gave 23 recitals in a single season in New York, which was a record.

The fast-paced, streamlined choreography and the use of orchestral music and imaginative decor which we see and take for granted in modern Indian balletic productions were innovations introduced by Uday Shankar. Fate was unkind to the centre he established in Almora in 1939. For various reasons it had to be closed down in 1944. But it was the first major attempt at integrating the various regional styles of Indian dance into a unified expression. At the centre, young

dancers were trained in Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and Manipuri. Much later, encouraged by this outlook and achievement, attempts began to be made to bridge wide cultural spans. In the USA, Matteo and Carola Goya have produced Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* with the sinister sorcerer modelled after the demoniac characters of Kathakali and the dances of the corps de ballet in Bharatanatyam style.

The most valuable contribution made by Uday Shankar was this. During the early phase when India was being exposed to European cultural impulses, their flood-tide momentum blurred for all of us for a long while the distinction between imitation and assimilation. But Uday Shankar remained anchored to his roots and showed that no artificial grafting was necessary and that the evolving tradition of Indian dance could mutate to modernity on its own. He did not include European instruments in his own orchestra though, if he had done so, it might not have given too much offence since the Bengal Jatra had already done it. If he created new instruments like the Saranga, they were easily recognised as belonging to the traditional family. He created shadow plays like *Life of the Buddha*, but Indian puppetry uses a lot of shadow presentation. The conti-

nunity with tradition can be seen in the fact that one of Uday Shankar's earliest ballets was based on the burning of Lanka by Hanuman. The Ram-Lila is an age-old tradition in India. But the way he handled it was innovative. Nevertheless, it showed the dialectical integration of evolving continuity and modulation seen in the speciation from any genus in the evolution of living forms. Without such a strongly stabilising achievement in the early phase of the encounter with the West, Indian painting stagnated for a long while in a purely imitative phase.

Anchored to Puranic themes where, even if the struggle between good and evil may be the theme, it is universalised to such degree that all specificity in terms of clear location in geographical space and historical time is lost, Indian dance has not been particularly venturesome in presenting the universal very clearly through the particular or in penetrating seizures of sinister trends. Here too Uday Shankar was a pioneer in his ballets like *Labour and Machinery* expressing the anomie created by the industrial-technological culture.

The most fascinating part of the publication is the illustration. That Uday Shankar met Ramon Novarro or Mary Pickford is no revelation, but it is very

interesting to learn that he had contacts with Serge Lifar and Mary Wigman for they are great personalities of European ballet. The dance pictures bring out the stately yet elegant lines of the attitudes, the care taken to

compose groups in relation to the surrounding space within the proscenium frame. There is one drawing by Uday Shankar; one wishes there had been several. The production is elegant.

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